

Pharmacy Access to Emergency Contraception in West Virginia

Introduction

Each year, there are about 3 million unintended pregnancies in the U.S., half of which occur even with regular use of contraception.

The average woman in this country spends up to 20 years of her life trying to avoid pregnancy. Emergency Contraception (EC) exists because there is always a chance that contraception fails- a condom breaks, a diaphragm slips, a woman forgets her pill, or a woman has sex when she doesn't plan to - or want to.

Manufactured under the pharmaceutical names Plan B and Preven, and sometimes referred to as the "morning-after pill," EC can *prevent pregnancy after sex*. It's a short, higher prescribed dose of the same hormones found in the Pill.

Although EC is an extremely effective way of preventing pregnancy, only 2 percent of women report ever having used EC. Studies have shown that less than one in four ob/gyns and family practice physicians discuss EC when they counsel their patients about birth control. Calls to healthcare providers inquiring about emergency contraception often yield misleading or false information about it - like EC is the abortion pill or it will harm an existing pregnancy. Worse, when a woman does get a prescription, a pharmacist might refuse to fill it for so-called 'moral' reasons.

EC cannot cause an abortion. FDA reports clearly proclaim that *EC prevents ovulation* and won't work if a woman is already pregnant. It is entirely different from RU-486.

The use of EC can reduce the risk of getting pregnant by up to 89 percent. It's been estimated that widespread awareness and use of EC **could prevent as many as half of the unintended pregnancies and 800,000 abortions in the U.S. each year.**

Today, 10 million American women rely on birth control pills to prevent pregnancy. There are also many other highly effective methods of birth control - some available by prescription, some over the counter. Because none of these methods are one hundred percent effective, they could all use a back up.

EC must be taken within 5 days after unprotected sex. The sooner it's taken after unprotected sex, the better the chances that it will prevent pregnancy. Without EC like Plan B in their medicine cabinets, women are often forced into troubling situations in their attempts to obtain EC.

It is hypothesized that when a woman is in need of emergency contraception, it may be difficult to find a pharmacy that carries the product, has it in stock, and has a pharmacist working that is willing to fill the prescription.

Survey Purpose

A coalition of health care and advocacy groups has evaluated pharmacy access to Plan B in West Virginia. Participating groups include: WV FREE, a reproductive justice advocacy organization, the American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia, and the West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services, a coalition that provides services to victims of sexual assault across the state.

Survey Methods

A list of 550 pharmacies in all 55 counties was divided by county. Some counties had over 75 pharmacies, while others had only one. Of the 550 pharmacies called, 431 responded resulting in a 78% response rate. However 49 out of 550 called were bad numbers or non-applicable due to services offered (nursing homes, inpatient clinics). Of the 550 pharmacies called, over 100 pharmacies declined the initial survey, so a second round of calls was made to find out simply whether they stocked Plan B, or not.

Each time a call was made, the caller requested to speak with the pharmacist. The pharmacist was asked: "Does your pharmacy stock emergency contraception, also known as Plan B?" Following were a series of questions concerning the cost and availability of Plan B, refusal policies, available substations, and pharmacist referral.

Collaborating Partners

WV Focus:
Reproductive Education and Equality
(WV FREE)
www.wvfree.org

American Civil Liberties Union of West
Virginia
www.acluww.org

West Virginia Foundation for Rape
and Information Services
www.fris.org